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POVERTY: SOME SUGGESTED REMEDIES.

BY G. P. BRETT.

IN Mr. Robert Hunter's remarkable study of Poverty, which has just been published, is given an array of figures which are appalling on account of the distress and suffering to which they call attention; but Mr. Hunter's book, while convincing in its figures, is even more so in its verbal descriptions of the want and destitution which prevail wherever population gathers itself together in towns and cities. It is not, perhaps, a new condition which Mr. Hunter brings to our notice, although the increase in poverty and want is growing much faster, in proportion, than the population of our larger cities; but it has never before, I believe, been so adequately set forth or in a form which is so convincing and interesting, even though it may startle those of us who believe that, in the boundless prosperity of our great country, none may starve or suffer except through fault of their own.

Mr. Hunter would define poverty, as I gather from his pages, as a condition or disease under which the sufferer is underfed, underclothed, and badly housed,—which last term in city life would mean living in an overcrowded tenement, with all the evils, that have been so often described by Mr. Jacob Riis and others, which accompany such overcrowding; and he finds more than ten million individuals in the United States (or something less than one-seventh of the population) in this state of poverty, some throughout the whole year, and some only during a certain part of it. Mr. Hunter's figures, too, include, as I understand it, those who lack only a few of the necessities of life, as well as those who are in the direst distress; but all in this vast army, in the most prosperous of all the nations of the earth, suffer hunger, feel the pinch of winter's cold without sufficient clothing, and are without any shelter that may properly be termed a home.

While Mr. Hunter's book is chiefly an account, and a most interesting one, of the conditions of poverty throughout the country, he does not, I gather, hope or look for any great improvement in these conditions during the existence of our present methods of economic distribution, except as such improvement may result from the individual or combined efforts on the part of the charitable workers, which, as has been too often proved, may not seldom be said to extend and foster the evils which they are intended to cure.

The aim of this article is not to discuss Mr. Hunter's very able book, for which task indeed the present writer's equipment is insufficient, but to endeavor to point out some facts in our modern life, of which able and constructive minds might take advantage with the result of banishing much of the want and hunger to which Mr. Hunter calls our attention.

Mr. Hunter estimates that in the city of New York not less than fourteen per cent., nor perhaps more than twenty-five per cent., of the entire population (the exact figures being difficult to obtain), suffer from poverty, and that a very large percentage of this poverty-stricken class suffer in the direst way from want and hunger. Yet within a hundred miles of the great city lie hundreds of abandoned farms, thousands of acres of unproductive land, much of which affords excellent pasturage and will grow excellent hay, and much will grow corn and other produce on a small scale. Not only is this true, but, within the confines of the territory that I have named, there are allowed to go to waste each year thousands of bushels of apples, garden-stuff, and other produce, much of it being left ungarnered to rot on the land, which would, at any rate, if of no great commercial value, tend to ameliorate the distress to which Mr. Hunter calls our attention, if it could be placed within the reach of the distressed classes.

These waste acres, these abandoned farms to which I have referred, can be easily found by any one who seeks them; and a very short experiment will prove them capable of producing crops, not adequate, perhaps, in comparison with the crops that may be grown on the Iowa and Indiana bottom-lands, but crops that will compare favorably with those of many other sections of our country.

It must be borne in mind, however, that the part of the coun-

try to which I am referring is, by the contour of the land as nature left it, designed to be the country of the small farm of ten acres or so, and that it is, accordingly, especially well fitted for the experiment I am advocating, which is, in brief, that these unused lands shall be made to feed our starving people from the results of their own labor upon it.

The farms being small, it is necessary to bear in mind that a ready market for the produce from them must be secured, as the present methods of marketing produce in New York from the adjoining territory will not avail for the small farmer I have in mind, the present freight rates, together with commission and packing charges, rendering quite impracticable the shipments of small quantities of produce from such small farms, close as they are to the city.

On several occasions I have myself sent apples, potatoes, onions and other produce, from a small farm in Connecticut, only to sustain a net loss on the shipments, after paying the many charges to which they are subject; while milk at such farms brings only two cents a quart in summer and three cents in winter, the balance of the price paid in New York being consumed by freight and handling charges.

I shall not endeavor to point out how the difficulties I have mentioned are to be overcome, but let it suffice to say that there is land enough available, and cheap, which if properly cultivated would feed, and feed well, a far larger distressed population than now suffers unrelieved among us.

Whether the task of making these waste places feed our present starving peoples shall be undertaken by a band of philanthropists who will purchase the lands, put colonists on them and provide means of bringing the produce to market within the reach of the poor purses of shipper and consumer; or whether the common people, urged on by the socialistic propaganda now so actively and ably set forth by many of our younger writers, and wearying of our present methods of distribution, shall confiscate the unused lands and take over and squeeze the water out of the stock and unnecessary expense out of the management of the railroads, no one can now foresee; but it seems probable that we shall, sooner or later, in one way or another, devise some means for relieving a destitution wholly unnecessary, and even criminal, in view of the unused acres of productive land lying at our doors.

An editorial writer in one of our evening newspapers not long ago called attention to the antiquity of the servant problem, quoting, among other writers, Defoe, in an effort to prove that the difficulties of obtaining adequate household service were just as great some hundreds of years ago as they are at present. Clever as was this writer's argument, there can be little doubt, in the minds of those acquainted with the modern aspect of the problem, that its difficulties from the standpoint of the employer are increasing year by year, and that these difficulties are probably the cause of much of the avoidance of home responsibilities, for which, as has been recently pointed out, the Americans as a people are to be reproached.

Not only do the wages of indoor and outdoor servants continually increase, and out of all proportion to the value of the service rendered, but those seeking employment of this character become year by year more exacting in their demands for what they term their rights, until in a moderate-sized household there is usually one servant at least "out" on every afternoon of the week; and the tendency of servants to leave a place, in the event of the slightest inconvenience or discomfort, has risen to such a pitch that in many households the comfort and convenience of the servants must, of necessity, be studied and catered to before any thought is given to the wants of the employer.

The conditions to which I have called attention in the preceding paragraph are, I may mention here, exactly the reverse of what is taking place in business, as far as minor clerical positions are concerned, where the present tendency is towards lower wages, and where clerks remain, year after year, in the same poorly paid positions and without hope, in many cases, of advancement. In fact, a porter or packer in many business houses will receive a smaller yearly wage than a useful man in house service, who also receives, in addition, his food and lodging; and thousands of women who work in clerical positions receive far less in wages than the well-fed and pampered individuals who consent to do our household work.

It is not, perhaps, the highest type of life, that of the house servant, particularly as in most cases it prohibits the home and family to those so engaged,—which we have recent authority for stating as the American ideal; but to many thousands of those sufferers from distress and want, whose case Mr. Hunter has so

ably set forth, house service would open a fascinating vista of relief from hard work to easy hours, lighter tasks, and well-fed prosperity.

With a little aid from a well-equipped training-school, many of those whose lives are now one constant and unceasing struggle with poverty could enter the ranks of this calling, which, if not among the highest ideals of American life, will still give employment at once easy, healthful, and well paid, and in which there are thousands of unfilled positions at all times, owing to the impossibility of getting applicants for them.

If the limits of space permitted, it would be easy to go on and point out other occupations, in addition to the two cited above, in which with a little judicious aid many of our starving millions might find employment; but enough has been said, I think, to prove that these are directions in which our charities might be far more wisely expended than in the indiscriminate giving which is so largely a feature of our present system. The fact is that the great and increasing complexities of our modern social and industrial life seem to require a new addition or department to our city governments—a bureau of employment and information in which can be brought together those needing employment and opportunity and those having occasion for such services.

Such a bureau, however, will have to be managed on different lines from some similar enterprises which are already a feature of our so-called charitable work, in an employment agency of one of which you may obtain, with great promptness, assistants whose character and honesty have never been inquired into, and whose services are of no value and would be dear at any price; or where, in another, you may have your laundry work done, to be returned full of holes from the acids employed in their cleansing, and display what thankfulness you may if they are not, in addition, contaminated by dirt and vermin.

Let us take, then, a few thousands of dollars out of the many thousands that are given away each year in indiscriminate and pauperizing charity, and found a school and bureau for the training of outdoor workers and farm-hands, and for getting or making places for these when trained. More such vacancies exist at all times than we could supply trained hands for after years of work, to say nothing of the small farms so necessary to be

made and tilled out of the idle lands lying all about us. A similar training-bureau (attention being paid to character and responsibility in both institutions), for female servants and which could be established and maintained at comparatively small cost, would become in turn a priceless boon to employer and employed, and do much to bring about the only millennium possible for this world, when every man would have his appointed work—the reverse of which is the rule to-day, when the poor and dispirited seekers for work, to the number of thousands daily, able-bodied and willing, but without special training, may travel many miles and suffer all hardships without finding work for willing hands to do.

G. P. BRETT.